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ABSTRACT

The austerity of the Great Depression, the popularity of progressive education, and scholarly research in reading from 1900 to 1930 initiated five golden years (1933-1938) of reading improvement in West Texas rural schools. Financial restraints relieved the schools from close scrutiny by the state's education agency. Schools were forced to improvise with whatever materials available. Teachers in isolated rural areas were freed to use innovative and experience-based approaches to teaching reading. The 1930 editions of "Elson Basic Readers" ("Dick and Jane") and older well known literary readers enjoyed extended life in classrooms. Support for education flourished and illiteracy was almost eradicated. (Contains 48 references.) (Author/RS)

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Five Golden Years: 1933-38

Reading Instruction in West Texas Rural Schools

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Abstract

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Reading Instruction in West Texas Rural Schools

The austerity of the Great Depression, the popularity of progressive education, and scholarly research in reading from 1900 to 1930, initiated five golden years of reading improvement in West Texas rural schools. Financial restraints relieved the schools from close scrutiny by the state's education agency. Schools were forced to improvise with whatever materials were available. Teachers in isolated rural areas were freed to use innovative and experience-based approaches to teaching reading. The 1930 editions of the Elson Basic Readers ("Dick and Jane") and older well-known literary readers enjoyed extended life in classrooms. Support for education flourished and illiteracy was almost eradicated.

Five Golden Years: 1933-38

Reading Instruction in West Texas Rural Schools

By Albert B. Tucker

Introduction

The economic austerity of the Great Depression motivated West Texas rural schools in the 1933-38 era to embrace the pragmatic and humanistic philosophy of education that John Dewey had been promoting since the turn of the century.[1] The election of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933 stimulated radical re-thinking of traditional approaches to government and education. Five years later the beginning of World War II delivered the nation from the effects of the Great Depression. Between these two events, the confluence of politics, philosophy, and economics resulted in a golden era for reading instruction.

The 1876 editions of McGuffey's Eclectic Readers, with their emphases on diacritical markings, phonetical decoding, and moral teachings had been replaced in the 1920s with whole word approaches, narrative stories, and literary readers.[2] The change from an emphasis on decoding skills to connected text had a profound and long lasting influence on the teaching of reading. By 1930, the published readers contained classical and well-known selections, but teachers used them mainly as supplemental readers

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[1] Rural West Texas, for this paper, is defined as geographically west of the Pecos River, and excludes the populous cities of El Paso, Pecos, and Fort Stockton.

[2] The original McGuffey's Eclectic Readers, published in 1836, were whole word and literature-based. Diacritical markings and phonetical decoding were not added until the 1876 editions.

or as literary selections more than as textbooks for the teaching of reading. Before 1933, teachers had used a combination of whole word and phonic approaches, with little thought to connected text. They considered oral recitation a part of the speech and literature curriculum, not an element of reading instruction.

As the economic woes of the depression deepened, West Texas rural schools made adjustments in curriculum, materials and methods. Due to shrinking government budgets, the Texas State Department of Education delayed close scrutiny of the schools, which freed teachers to use interesting materials, personal experiences, and creative approaches for motivating students. Between 1933 and 1938, teachers focused on the student more than on the content.

Pedagogically, it was a "Golden Age" for reading, a natural outgrowth of three decades of reading research. Robert Hillerich concluded that "the period from 1920 to about 1935 was one in which the greatest advances were made in the teaching of reading" (Hillerich, 1983, p.13). Innovations in reading instruction escalated. Consistent with Dewey's pragmatic philosophy, school districts encouraged reading teachers to find and use approaches that worked best, while research on perceptual processes were largely ignored (Venezky, 1984, p. 12). Consequently, the 1933-38 years were forerunners of two decades (1940s & 1950s) of almost unanimous support for the public schools.

A Change in Philosophy

By 1932, the rural schools moved from an objective classical tradition to a subjective experiential philosophy. The Alpine, Texas, Parent-Teacher Association, for instance, sponsored a debate on whether or not dating should be allowed on school nights, a rather shallow topic according to classical traditions. Educators, convinced that movies would revolutionize the delivery of education, encouraged students to go to the theaters, where cowboy heroes, such as Hoot Gibson and Johnny Mack Brown, made regular appearances.(Alpine Avalanche, January 1, 8; May 29; November 23, 1932). Gene Autry introduced the singing "B" Western movie in 1934 and romanticized the west. Art and music participation increased, but the quality diminished (Efland, 1983, p. 38-42). By 1933, educators were ready to try just about anything that worked.

Dewey's ideas had gained popularity with a group of rising young educators, such as reading expert Edmund Burke Huey and educational historian Frederick Eby (Huey, 1908, p. 4; Archambault, 1966, p. viii). The non-educated public, too, saw the logic of a laboratory-based education (translated: learning by doing). "Experience is the best teacher" became an unchallenged truism. But it took the economic hardships of the depression to give progressive education a chance to infiltrate the schools.

The Progressive Education Association conducted an eight

year study (from 1932 to 1940) in which selected high schools departed from a traditional curriculum and adopted an open curriculum, based on experience and interests. The schools in rural west Texas also followed that pattern, not deliberately, but through economic necessity. The students participated more, showed more intellectual curiosity, and made better grades than students in traditional programs (Best, 1959, pp.300-305).

By 1933, the nation's economic woes depleted state revenues. State and local governments ran out of money. Publishers reduced the printing of textbooks. School boards cut teachers' monthly salary from $100 to $60, and paid them in scrip, which merchants further discounted when cashed (Casey, 1985). That a merchant would accept scrip at all was rarely advertised. Hassen Company of Alpine, Texas, for instance, once advertised "We accept scrip," but quickly replaced it the following week with "It pays to pay cash" (Alpine Avalanche, March 11 & 18, 1932). West Texas schools delayed opening until the end of September, 1932, so that teachers would not have long to wait for their October 1st pay-scrip (Alpine Avalanche, September 2, 1932).

Widespread unemployment resulted in teacher surpluses, as it did in all occupations. So many people were out of a job that it was unnecessary to advertise an opening. Yet, rarely, if ever, did newspapers mention that "more than 15 million men were looking for jobs that did not exist" (Manchester, 1974, p. 32).

As teacher surpluses grew, teacher salaries declined. Decreasing tax revenues led school boards to trim programs.

Student enrollment climbed to record heights. Retired teachers returned to the classrooms and experienced teachers delayed retirements. They preferred the modest pay of teachers to no-longer existing savings accounts.[3] Legislators, new teachers, and jealous out-of-work people cried out against the policy of a life certificate for teachers (Townsend, 1935, p. 51). In an attempt to employ more educators, the legislature authorized, in 1934, a survey of Texas school facilities (Report, 1934). Although the report contained no judgments about quality and compliance, it influenced future decisions regarding consolidations of school districts.

Though interest and participation in education had bloomed prior to 1933, student quality and teacher competence plummeted in the minds of the public. A. L. Crabb (1932, p. 303), editor of the Peabody Journal of Education, spoke against the growing tendency to rely on examinations as the basis for granting certificates to new teachers. Competency, he claimed, included time, attendance, instruction, and dedication; not just passing an examination. R. M. Hutchins (1933, p. 95) voiced concern over the drastic reduction of teacher's salaries. He advocated thinning out the teacher ranks by firing the incompetent teachers and raising the salaries of the competent ones. Had it not been for the prior thirty years of quality lectures, research, and dedicated disciples of John Dewey, Hutchins' suggestions might

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[3] The Texas State Retirement System for teachers was another ten years away.

have been implemented.

By the time the effects of the depression reached West Texas in 1933, Dewey's philosophical tenets had taken root in the fertile soil of the schools. The lack of money and jobs made school attendance more attractive for the children, especially if it de-emphasized textbooks and emphasized hands-on activities. Teacher training in the normal schools emphasized process more than product: i.e., how to teach more than what to teach. School became a happy place, and it provided for the children while the parents worked.

The Reading Textbooks

Arthur Gates first used the term "basal" when he published "A Basal Reading Series" in 1933. (Venezky, 1987, p. 252).[4] Although the term "basal" did not come into widespread use until the 1960s, his promotion of a "basal" textbook for teaching reading, as opposed to a collection of stories to be read, greatly influenced reading instruction. Books that were formerly used only as "supplemental" readers became the "basals" for teaching reading. Throughout the 1920s teachers had became increasingly aware that reading was more than decoding words. Students could not just read reading, but they had to read something, and that something became content subjects (Venezky, 1987, p. 259).

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[4] Gray and Elson used the term basic readers in 1930, which may have influenced Gates' use of the term basal readers.

William H. Wheeler's series of Literary Readers with Interpretations (1919) resisted the pressure toward subject-matter reading at the expense of literature. His Fifth Reader contained classic selections, such as "The Steadfast Tin Soldier" by Hans Christian Anderson, "Robin Hood and the Archers" by Sir Walter Scott, and "Robinson Crusoe Makes a Home" by Daniel Defoe. His preservation of reading as primarily a literary function inspired a rash of textbook readers based on content subjects. The Laidlaw Readers (Dressel, 1924) focused on history and social studies, the Science Readers, published by D. C. Heath (Nida & Nida, 1926), emphasized science-based reading, and the Thought-Study Readers, published by Lyons and Carnahan (Spencer, 1929), tried to include all content subjects. Paul Spencer, author of the Thought-Study Readers, assured teachers that "in no sense is it the purpose of these readers to take the place of the literary type of readers" (Spencer, 1929, p. 3). Nevertheless, from 1920 to 1933, reading had become a tool for learning subject matter, and the joy of reading dwindled to a low priority.

The 1920s research of Arthur Gates and Williams S. Gray had suggested that knowledge and application of research in reading improved teacher effectiveness when combined with cooperative efforts and adequate time is allowed for implementing the program (Gray, 1933, p. 220). Gates questioned the research of Morphet and Washburn (1931) that concluded mental age 6.5 was the proper minimum for learning to read. Gates found that reading readiness was more a result of effective teaching than a result of mental

and physical development (Gates, 1937). The growing popularity of the Herbartian emphasis on experience influenced reading instruction to accommodate individual differences based on scientific and psychological principles (Mavrogenes, 1985. p. 3). Therefore, new textbooks in reading were needed in the early 1930s that reflected the philosophies of Herbartian experience and Dewey's progressivism.

The challenge was clear. William S. Gray designed a reading program driven by instruction and interests rather than physical perceptual ability. Gray collaborated with William Elson and Lura Runkel in 1930 to revise the 1921 editions of the Elson Readers. The revised series began with easy to teach sight words, combined with colorfully illustrated actions of the major characters named Dick, Jane, Baby, and Spot. The combination of sight words and expressive illustrations told stories that conceptually exceeded the limited vocabularies of most beginning readers. These Elson Basic Readers "became the most widely used reading books in the country" (Mavrogenes, 1985, p. 1).

The new Elson-Gray Readers focused on "a specific aspect of social environment or child interest," and it provided helps for the teacher and the pupil (Elson & Gray, 1930, Book Five, p. 3). The pre-primer and primer editions (which introduced Dick and Jane) described the readers as sequenced, simple, interesting, and based on scientific studies (Elson & Gray, 1930, Primer, p. 5). The upper level books used a variety of literature, such as "The Golden Touch" by Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Gladness of

Nature" by William Cullen Bryant, and "Robinson Crusoe and His Famous Raft" by Daniel Defoe. Gray edited an additional series of readers for the content areas, called the Curriculum Foundation Series, which he correlated with the Elson Basic Readers. This series of content oriented books did not become popular. West Texans' main curricular concern was reading, writing and arithmetic, preferably in English. Subject matter content had low priority in West Texas rural schools between 1933 and 1938.

West Texas rural school teachers preferred Gray's Elson Basic Readers and Wheeler's Literary Readers because these were among the first textbooks to be provided free by the State of Texas, and the binding held up through the dark days of the depression when books could not be easily replaced. Wheeler's books remained popular, although originally published in 1919, because most of the young teachers entering the profession between 1933 and 1938 were familiar with them from their own school days, and the bindings were exceptionally tough.

The popularity of the Elson-Gray "Dick and Jane" readers and Wheeler's readers encouraged other publishing companies. In 1935, Johnson Publishing Company captured the spirit of Dewey's philosophy. The Happy Hour Readers, a title that depression weary teachers surely appreciated, featured "Dick and Jane" type characters: Jo-boy, Patty, Billy, and another dog named Spot. These readers, based on "the psychology of experience," promoted meaning over word decoding. The Teacher's Guide in Good Friends

(A First Reader) states: "The purpose of reading is to get meanings. Meanings are gained through the experience of the individual" (English and Alexander, 1935, First Reader, p.1). The first two pages of the Happy Hour Readers Teacher's Guide used the word "experience" no less than thirteen times.

Other readers were available, but as teachers did not have multiple copies, they used a variety of odds and ends. The State of Texas also adopted the Workaday Readers by Clarence Truman Gray (1929), which were designed for silent reading. The texts admonished the children not to move their lips, tongues, or other parts of their mouths and throat while reading. The stories were borrowed from classical literature. As many students in West Texas schools spoke Spanish as their primary language, the Workaday Readers were not only out of reach in vocabulary, but in concept. The Elson Basic Readers ("Dick and Jane") and the Happy Hour Readers, with their emphases on the sight word method, were popular with the Spanish speaking students who wanted to learn English.

The later criticism by Rudolf Flesch (1955), Jeanne Chall (1958) and A. S. Trace (1965) that "Dick and Jane" represented ethnic bias, sexism, and dull content, was not a problem to the West Texas Mexican and Anglo children. The "Dick and Jane" setting was equally foreign to both cultures. For these children, raking leaves, drinking from water fountains, and parents wearing Sunday clothes everyday were unheard of behaviors. The children in rural West Texas accepted the implied

premise that textbooks portrayed the world as it should be, not as it is.

The Teaching Processes

I recently interviewed several retired teachers who taught in the rural schools in the Big Bend of Texas from 1933 to 1938. They were ambiguous about the way they taught reading, although all of them emphatically considered reading the first priority of the curriculum. This finding is affirmed in Milan Rowold's research of rural Texas schools, 1900 to 1929. "Unquestionably, the most important subject in the rural curriculum was reading" (Rowold, 1983, p.109). The methods they used for teaching reading were many and varied, often teaching reading the way they were taught -- a mixture of sight words and phonics. Many of the teachers admitted that they had no particular method for teaching reading, short of writing the word on the board and telling the students what it said. None of them claimed to be experts in the teaching of reading, but they all recalled that the pupils did learn to read.

The most striking characteristic of their teaching processes was the lack of formal lesson plans. Among their memorabilia of photographs, report cards, samples of students' works, and copies of teaching contracts, not one lesson plan book was found. The lack of lesson plan books, however, should not be interpreted as a lack of planning.

One of the primary uses of a lesson plan is to provide

guidance for substitute teachers. But West Texas rural teachers never missed school, unless absolutely necessary, in which case, the teacher usually dismissed school. Occasionally, the school trustees hired a substitute if the teacher was out more than a week or two, but the substitute teacher was expected to plan her own lessons. In addition, the scarcity of paper precluded waste. Although Big Chief tablets were plentiful, they were hardly sturdy enough to survive daily handling. Attendance was relatively stable during the depression, but pupil turn-over was high. Teachers could rarely count on consistent class rolls. Planning more than one or two days in advance was not practical, and, anyway, no one checked if they did lesson plans or not. The multiple levels of students found in the typical one-room school made preparation of lesson plans time consuming, which could be better used helping students. In place of lesson plans, teachers taught skills as the need arose. In the course of reading and discussing, topics would arise that were compatible with the students' interests.

Teachers used methods that matched the materials they had at hand. For instance, because Herschel "Pat" Patterson (1990) did not have textbooks the first several days he taught at the Molinar School in Brewster County, he invited the children to tell stories. As they talked, he wrote their stories on the blackboard and the children took turns reading aloud. This method is now called the Language Experience Approach (LEA). Raymond Wheat (1990) taught reading at the Casa Piedras School in

Presidio County. After he read the story to all of the children, a child would stand by the desk and read aloud the same story for an amount of time, then pass it to the next child. They were re-reading and listening, processes approved by today's whole language advocates.

The Perry School at Terlingua had more books than the other schools. In 1934, teacher Ernestine Behrens (1992) had several copies of books. She put the children into groups and let them read aloud to each other, while she circulated among them. Lydia Keller Ekdall (Moye, 1991), who taught at the Perry School in 1938, had a collection of interesting books, but only one or two copies of each. She assigned a book to each student, who read it then passed it on to another student. Before the school year was over, all students had read, or at least handled, a large number of books. This method is now called the Individualized Approach.

Because students were often on multiple reading levels, they could not all read from the same book title. Sometimes the children on the same level clustered and took turns reading aloud, while at other times they all read aloud at the same time. Older students often read to the younger students, and younger students re-told the story to their even younger brothers and sisters.

Though writing was not often tied directly to reading, it was used for other purposes. Young Arturo Fierro wrote "I will not hit girls" one hundred times on his Big Chief tablet. Actually, he wrote "I will" one hundred times, "I will not hit"

fifty times, but managed to avoid writing "girls" more than two times. The Big Chief tablets were used, too, to copy stories from books, a legitimate use of writing, considering that duplicate copies of books were not available. In this way, the student could practice reading at home. This method is now called the Whole Language philosophy.

Story time was a favorite time of the day. Sometimes the story was read from a book, but more often the teacher told the story from memory. The students would then be invited to tell a story. Soon, the oral tradition expanded, and students told and re-told stories, constantly adding to their verbal language ability.

Field trips were part of the experiential-based program. In 1934, Ann Ellis (1968) planned a field trip on her first day of school at Mine 39, located in the Big Bend wilderness. The school was without drinking water, so she gave each student an empty can and led them on a hike to the nearest water hole, about a mile away. There the children filled their cans and carefully carried them back to the school where they emptied them into the water barrel for future use. They also analyzed why a young boy's pants caught fire as he slid down a hill on a piece of corrugated sheet metal. Matches, they learned, do not have to be directly struck in order to be lit.

Ernestine Behrens planned a May Day party for the children. They built king and queen thrones from mesquite bushes and sotol sticks. They invented a dance especially for dancing around the

May Pole. Miss Behrens dealt with discipline problems in a soft-handed way. Facundo had thrown a spitwad at one of the girls, but rather than confront him directly, she gave him a chance to confess, which he did. Lydia Keller Ekdall (Moye, 1991) taught the children to wash their hands before eating, and Ethel Skevington taught them how to sing. Annie Adams Babb, (1990) taught the girls how to sew their own clothes, and Hattie Grace Peters (Elliot, 1985) taught them about grooming. Elizabeth Bledsoe and Rubye Burcham crusaded for health care and guided Mexican nationals through the bureaucratic processes for becoming United States citizens (Ragsdale, 1976, p. 143).

All of these experiences developed vocabularies useful in learning how to read. Manuel Polanco (1990) learned to read with help from his third grade teacher, Raymond Wheat. As an adult, Polanco determined that all five of his own children would go to school, and eventually they all graduated from Sul Ross State University. Paulina Cepeda (1992), also a Sul Ross graduate, learned to read in 1934 at the Perry School in Terlingua, then returned in 1942 to teach a year before accepting a position with the Del Rio schools. She retired in 1990 from the El Paso schools, after teaching nearly fifty years in the public schools of Texas.

In the final analysis, though, the Elson Basic Readers and Wheeler's Literary Readers had little to do with the golden years of reading achievement. The state agencies and school financing had even less to do with it, and the teaching methods and

processes meant nothing. Mainly, the golden age of reading, from 1933 to 1938, came from a group of dedicated and innovative teachers who were freed from bureaucratic scrutiny, needless paperwork, and legislated mandates. The effects of the Great Depression, three decades of reading research by Edmund Burke Huey, William S. Gray and Arthur Gates, and the infusion of Dewey's Progressive Education in normal schools, inspired rural teachers to do whatever was necessary to help students learn how to read. And it worked.

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